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Book Reviews

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Review of *Critical Marxism in Mexico: Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez and Bolívar Echeverría* by Stefan Gandler (Haymarket)

Arnold L Farr

ABSTRACT With this book, Stefan Gandler has made important contributions to the study of Marxism and critical social theory in Mexico. Regarding the first contribution, this book expands the theoretical tools and insights within the canon of Marxist thought. It does this by exposing American and European Marxists to two very important thinkers who have not yet been given much attention by Marxists outside of the Latin American context. The second contribution lies in Gandler's exegetical work on the texts of these two thinkers, Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez and Bolívar Echeverría.

Critical Marxism in Mexico: Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez and Bolívar Echeverría. By Stefan Gandler. Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2016, 467 pp. (paperback) ISBN 1608466337. US List: \$36.00.

With this book Stefan Gandler has made important contributions to the study of Marxism and critical social theory in Mexico. Regarding the first contribution, this book expands the theoretical tools and insights within the canon of Marxist thought. It does this by exposing American and European Marxists to two very important thinkers who have not yet been given much attention by Marxists outside of the Latin American context.

The second contribution lies in Gandler's exegetical work on the texts of these two thinkers, Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez and Bolívar Echeverría. Gandler's book then is a useful commentary and critical analysis for theorists in Latin America and beyond. In *toto* this book serves as an important corrective to the Eurocentric nature of western and orthodox canonical Marxism. Running through the book is the problem of the location of theory. By "location of theory" I am suggesting (as I think Gandler is) that geographical, social, and political context plays a role in the development of theory. The social and political conditions, as well as the forms of domination against which a thinker struggles have an impact on the way in which theory develops. Hence, Gandler along with the two thinkers who are the subject matter of this book offer a challenge to the traditional Eurocentric notion of universalism. Gandler tries to show that the idea of universalism that has been passed down from European philosophy is an abstract universalism that does not adequately apply to specific situations and contexts.

Even the reading of Marx or any thinker is a located reading that reflects the situatedness of the reader. This does not open the door for a mindless form of relativism, but rather, it creates space for a plurality of voices in the midst of the struggle for a transformed world. Each voice brings to the conversation its limitations as well as its own unique insights and contributions. Before expounding on the theories of Sánchez Vázquez and Echeverría, Gandler provides quite a bit of background information that situates the two

philosophers. The social, political, and economic landscape of which they were a part helps to elucidate the trajectory of their thinking.

Both Sánchez Vázquez and Echeverría struggled against at least two problems that they saw in other forms of Marxism. There is the problem of orthodox Marxism and western Marxism, and then there is the struggle between idealism and materialism. With regards to orthodox Marxism the problem is its dogmatism that in the end leads to a form of political paralysis. While western Marxism is not as dogmatic as orthodox Marxism, it tends to get bogged down in bourgeois philosophical problems and as a result loses its focus on transformative praxis.

It is the problem of praxis or transformative political activity that is at the center of the work of both Sánchez Vázquez and Echeverría. Although their approaches are different they are still complimentary. Sánchez Vázquez's theory of praxis is guided by his deep reading of Marx's *Eleven Thesis on Feuerbach*, particularly the first "Thesis." His theory of praxis is grounded in praxis as the intentional transformation of an object such as nature or society. According to Gandler, Echeverría believed that Sánchez Vázquez's view of praxis was still too abstract. This led Echeverría to develop a theory of praxis which was grounded not just in the transformation of the world but in the constitution of the world. Hence, Echeverría's reading of Marx would extend to the *Grundrisse* and *Capital* as foundational texts for a philosophy of praxis. This focus on the later works by Marx allowed Echeverría to explore more deeply the Marxian concept of use-value as constitutive of human praxis and society.

While Gandler's book is filled with analysis of very interesting theoretical developments by Sánchez Vázquez and Echeverría, I find particularly fascinating the discussions in chapters thirteen and fourteen. Chapter Thirteen examines Echeverría's unique views on capitalism and modernity while Chapter Fourteen examines his concept of historical ethos. In these chapters I find tremendous opportunities for the advancement of Marxism and critical theory in the postmodern era. In these chapters Echeverría's theory offers an interesting challenge to the error of Eurocentrism and the abstract universalism of the current form of social reproduction. Further, the idea of modernity as a global linear development which reaches its highpoint in Europe and the US is dismantled. Echeverría speaks of modernities that coexist but are ignored by the Eurocentric narrative of modernity. Gandler writes:

Echeverría considers it his role to point out theoretically the *possibility* and even (albeit repressed, concealed, or negated) the *reality* of *other* modernities. From Echeverría's point of view, "actually-existing modernity" is not the only one which really exists, but is, instead, the one which dominates, and moreover from whose perspective the presence or possibility of other modernities is looked upon with disapproval: it simply denies their existence and attempts to crush them in praxis. [p.260]

This quote captures the entire purpose very well insofar as this book is written with the intent to expose the marginalization of non-European versions of Marxism. The discourse of modernity has been constructed in such a way that it has put under erasure various possibilities for creative interpretations of Marx, as well as forms of liberating praxis outside of Europe and the US.

Since Marx himself viewed his theory as historical and subject to historical modification, we must always read Marx anew. However, Gandler and the two philosophers examined in his book remind us that history or the historical is also special (geographical). That is, the historical act occurs in different ways and different places. Every reading of Marx and Marxism occurs within the confines of a particular geo/political location. That location

impacts one's reading of a text as well as the particular limitations and insights one may discover in the text. Gandler's book is a reminder that understanding and getting the most out of Marx requires an international effort.

 [Bio](#)



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Arnold L. Farr received his Ph. D. in philosophy from the University of Kentucky in 1996. He became a member of the philosophy department at St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia PA where he was tenured in 2002. After 12 years at St Joseph's Arnold was hired by the University of Kentucky. His research interests are German idealism, Marxism, critical theory, philosophy of race, postmodernism, psychoanalysis, and liberation philosophy. He has published numerous articles and book chapters on all of these subjects. He is co-author and co-editor of *Marginal Groups and Mainstream American Culture*. In 2009 he published *Critical Theory and Democratic Vision: Herbert Marcuse and Recent Liberation Philosophies*. He is currently working on a book on race, a collection of essays on Marcuse, and a single authored manuscript entitled *Misrecognition, Mimetic Rivalry, and One-Dimensionality: Toward a Critical Theory of Human Conflict*. Arnold is also the founder of the International Herbert Marcuse Society which meets every two years.



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